**“The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility”. Evaluate this claim.**

Knowledge is everywhere and can be obtained in many different ways. As a result of this every human on the planet has knowledge of something. This knowledge could be completely unimportant to one person, and yet could be the difference between life and death for another. “The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility”, is an interesting claim and both sides can be argued for. In general I believe that knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility, once somebody is in possession of a piece of knowledge then it is up to them what they are going to do with it. It all depends on what the knowledge is, the situation they are in, who they are imparting it to or withholding knowledge from and how this will affect people. However in order to evaluate this claim impartially, some knowledge issues must be looked at.

The knowledge issues that I have identified are; how can you possess knowledge? How is the knowledge you have affected by your ethics? And how can one know when they are ethically responsible? By thinking about these knowledge issues it allows us to evaluate the claim properly.

The first knowledge issue asks the question of how one can be in possession of knowledge. Technology has not evolved enough yet to allow us to know with a certain degree of certainty, what a particular person may or may not know. As a result of this it is not possible to ascertain what somebody may have knowledge of, and even then, they may have forgotten certain information or have a subconscious knowledge of something that they themselves may not be aware of. Possession of knowledge therefore can be open to interpretation; does possession of knowledge mean that the person has to be aware of the knowledge and be able to use it? Or does it simply mean that even if they have lost all memory of it, if it is still in their head and subsequently theoretically accessible to them, then are they deemed to be in possession of it? For the purposes of evaluating the statement, the latter answer will be considered correct.

I believe that for the second knowledge issue it can be said that yes, knowledge is affected by your ethics. If two people are in possession of the same knowledge then one person may choose to use that knowledge differently to the other, because their ethics will dictate what they will do with it. Knowing when you are ethically responsible completely relies on the situation at hand. You are responsible for the knowledge itself but unless the possession of that knowledge affects something or someone profoundly then you may not be ethically responsible for that knowledge. To further understand these knowledge issues and by extension the claim, we have to look at ethics as an area of knowledge.

Ethics as an area of knowledge can be related to the claim by taking the example of Albert Einstein’s knowledge of nuclear physics. He was in possession of the knowledge and could have kept it to himself, rather than publishing his findings for the world to see, potentially preventing tragedies such as Hiroshima.[[1]](#footnote-1) His ethics should have told him that by imparting this knowledge to the world, a weapon of mass destruction could be created and used; destroying millions of people’s lives and making many more live in fear of such a weapon. However, looking at it from Einstein’s point of view it can be argued that as a scientist he is ethically bound to impart any knowledge which may have an effect on the scientific community. The argument for Einstein can be strengthened because of the implementation of nuclear power plants in many countries around the world, providing a relatively clean power source for people who may otherwise not have been able to have access to it. Reason and emotion can also come into this example, it was reasonable for Einstein to share his findings as a scientist, but if he used his emotion to decide then he may never have decided to impart that knowledge. By looking at this example it can be seen that ethics as an area of knowledge has a very broad spectrum and can be used to justify both sides of an argument, and that neither side of the argument can lay claim to be ‘correct’. As stated above, if two people have different ethics they will use the knowledge they have in different ways and still be able to justify their actions by stating that they were just following their beliefs and through that, were able to decide how they were ethically responsible, which subsequently allows them to decide on the best course of action. I believe that this example helps highlight the fact that although people will be using ethics as an area of knowledge in different ways, it is still always related to how they use the knowledge in their possession.

Another example concerning ethics which may help understand the claim that possession of knowledge carries ethical responsibility is the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Ben Johnson won the 100m gold medal before testing positive for steroids. Ethically, this went against everything an athlete stands for as using performance enhancing drugs is simply cheating. However at that time, ‘everyone was using them’ so was it ethically ok? Ben Johnson used reason as his way of knowing to decide that it was ok for him to take these drugs. Another ethical problem arising from this example is that Ben Johnson is on record as stating that he didn’t know what drugs he was taking or what they would do, he was just accepting what his doctor gave him. This once again raises the argument of if Johnson was in fact in possession of the knowledge that he was using performance enhancing drugs, as he did not know exactly what affects they were having on his body.[[2]](#footnote-2) His doctor – George Astaphan – knew exactly what drugs were being used and knew the risks involved. As a result of Astaphan’s knowledge of the drugs and what they were doing, was he ethically responsible to not give Johnson the drugs because it was cheating? Or was he ethically responsible to give him the drugs because he was a doctor and Johnson was his client so he was obliged to help him? Once again it can be seen, after looking at the evidence given, that either way you look at it both Astaphan and Johnson were ethically responsible for the knowledge they had of the drugs and their use of the drugs thereafter.

20 years after the Seoul Olympics there was a financial crisis in the world. Banks were losing people’s money as a result of using them for other things and then not being able to recuperate it afterwards. This created a major problem in the world with many banks going bankrupt and having to close their branches across the world.[[3]](#footnote-3) This example connects with the claim as banks are ethically responsible to take care of all money put into their care, as this is exactly what clients are expecting to happen when they use that bank. When the banks started to lose the money should they have not told their clients straight away rather than waiting until there was nothing left at all? This example connects with me personally as my father was working for an Irish company at the time, and due to the massive hit the Irish economy took, his salary was cut and then frozen affecting our family. If they had told us about the potential crisis we may have been able to prepare for it and therefore not have been as affected as we ended up being. It can definitely be argued that the banks acted selfishly and were ethically wrong to keep this information from the general public. It could also be argued however that releasing this information to the public could have generated a worldwide depression as people would have panicked, taken all of their money out of the banks and found other ways of keeping it themselves. This would not only have led to many economies collapsing but crime levels would have risen worldwide as people would now know that many people would have their life savings hidden in their house, rather than having it in a bank. By looking at it this way it can also be claimed that the banks were ethically correct to not disclose the knowledge that they had of the situation. Once again this example helps explain the fact that no matter which way you look at the possession of knowledge someone will always be ethically responsible for that knowledge.

By looking at these examples and using them to evaluate the claim that ‘the possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility’ it can be said that yes, possession of knowledge does carry an ethically responsibility. I believe this is the case because by looking at the given examples, every way you look at a situation you are able to justify the actions by looking at the ethics involved and applying them correctly to the situation. Even though some of the justifications are obviously arguing against what would be right in most people’s eyes you can see how in some points of view, their ethics would justify the decisions that they made. By using the examples as evidence to back up my claim, I believe that the statement can be said to be correct and that possession of all knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility.

Word Count: 1593

# Bibliography

Diehl, S. J., & Moltz, J. C. (2008). *Nuclear Weapons and Nonproliferation: A Reference Handbook.*

"Financial crisis timeline | Business | guardian.co.uk ." Latest US news, world news, sport and comment from the Guardian | guardiannews.com | The Guardian . http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/oct/08/creditcrunch.marketturmoil

Witt, Howard, and Chicago Tribune.. "Coach Says Johnson On Steroids Since `81 - Chicago Tribune." Featured Articles From The Chicago Tribune. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1989-03-02/sports/8903230608\_1\_american-carl-lewis-muscle-enhancing-drugs-illegal-anabolic-steroids

1. Diehl, S. J., & Moltz, J. C. (2008). *Nuclear Weapons and Nonproliferation: A Reference Handbook.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Witt, Howard, and Chicago Tribune.. "Coach Says Johnson On Steroids Since `81 - Chicago Tribune." Featured Articles From The Chicago Tribune. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1989-03-02/sports/8903230608\_1\_american-carl-lewis-muscle-enhancing-drugs-illegal-anabolic-steroids [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. " Financial crisis timeline | Business | guardian.co.uk ." Latest US news, world news, sport and comment from the Guardian | guardiannews.com | The Guardian . http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/oct/08/creditcrunch.marketturmoil [↑](#footnote-ref-3)